

Some aspects of qualification in Tunisian Berber

A still controversial issue in Berber linguistics is the way of expressing qualification. Some Berber languages like Tuareg and Ghadamsi tend to make use of verbs and do not possess a nominal class of “adjectives”, while other languages have a more or less consistent sub-class of nouns that roughly correspond to this category. On the contrary, Arabic possesses a rich palette of “adjectives”, and the influence of this language as a superstratum in North-Africa has some consequences in this field too.

The Berber languages of Tunisia are heavily influenced by Arabic in many instances, above all in lexicon, but also in morphosyntax. As far as qualification is concerned, one can notice some interesting features, brought about by a process of integration of borrowings within the Berber morphosyntax. The features dealt with by this paper are:

- 1) the existence of relics of “qualitative verbs”, and
- 2) the morphology of some adjectives expressing colours or physical defects.

1. In Cheninni, Tamazret and possibly also Douiret, a few words still preserve the Berber special conjugation of “qualitative verbs”. This special conjugation is preserved in many other Berber languages, with several variants. The most common features which set these verbs apart from the “regular” verb conjugations are the lack of personal prefixes, the use of a special suffix for the feminine singular persons and the use of one form for all the persons in the plural.

Some examples from Cheninni:

sing. m.	sing. f.	pl. common	
<i>ṭwil</i>	<i>ṭwilyet</i>	<i>ṭwal</i>	‘long’
<i>eqšir</i>	<i>eqširyet</i>	<i>eqšar</i>	‘short’

Curiously, all the examples singled out are borrowings from Arabic adjectives, while the Berber words that usually share this morphology do not belong here.

The status of these words in Cheninni is intermediate between verbs and nouns:

- they do not require the predicative particle *d* which is needed by qualitative nominals
- they are negated by means of the nominal negator *muš*, not the verbal negators *we ... š*.

2. The Berber of Jerba displays, like some other varieties in Tunisia and neighbouring regions (Tamazret, Mzab, Ouargla, Jebel Nefusa), a peculiar form of “adjectives” expressing colours or physical defects. All of them are borrowings from Arabic, and this is confirmed by the retention of the Arabic article *l-*, but differently from the numerous borrowings where this article is rendered by the mere consonant *l-* (or *əl-*, *lə-*), this class of words adds a vowel *i-*, of unclear origin, at the beginning. Some examples from Jerba :

iləḥwəl ‘cross-eyed’ (Arabic *aḥwal*);
iləšfər ‘green/yellow’ (Arabic *ašfar*)
iləšxəm ‘grey’ (vernacular Arabic *šxəm*)

These words have been integrated into the Berber noun morphology, so for instance from *iletrəš* ‘deaf’ the feminine is *tilettrəšt*. The vast area of diffusion of this kind of adjectives and some phonetic changes point to an old age of these borrowings.

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